



[Carl Clausewitz, 1780-1831](#)

On War

Michael Howard, translator of Clausewitz' work, and author of "[Clausewitz](#)", opens his Introduction with a quote from one Bernard Brodie, about Clausewitz: *"His is not simply the greatest, but the only great book about war;"* and Howard records his own agreement with this assessment.

If you can get it, Howard's book helps readers a lot towards understand Clausewitz' "[On War](#)" (Chapter 1, the summarising chapter, is attached) but in one respect Howard appears to be mistaken.

After describing Clausewitz' "dialectic" (e.g. the relationship between physical and moral forces; between historical knowledge and critical judgement; between idea and

manifestation; between “absolute” and “real” war; between attack and defence; and between ends and means) Howard writes: *“The dialectic was not Hegelian: it led to no synthesis which itself conjured up its antithesis. Rather it was a continuous interaction between two poles, each fully comprehensible only in terms of the other.”*

But it would seem to be perfectly [Hegelian](#) to conceive of such a unity and struggle of opposites; and as to whether Clausewitz’s dialectic lacked a forward dynamic, or not, is something that can be settled at once by reading only a few pages; whereupon it will be found that Clausewitz is surely one of the most dynamic authors ever.

Clausewitz was ten years younger than Hegel. He died only two days after Hegel, on 16 November 1831. They were both victims of the same cholera epidemic.

Since Hegel’s was the official philosophy of Prussia, and Clausewitz was in charge of the Prussian War College in Berlin for twelve years, while Hegel was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Berlin, it is impossible to believe that Clausewitz was not familiar with Hegel’s then highly fashionable ideas.

These were the same Hegelian ideas that seized the imagination of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (both of whom spent time in Berlin during the late 1830s to early 1840s) and upon which their thinking relied for the rest of their lives. Clausewitz and Marxism are not far apart, neither in their pedigree, nor in the philosophical structure of their thinking.

Much is made, in the commentaries on Antonio Gramsci's 20th-century writings, of the contrast between wars of manoeuvre and of position. But the military breakthrough of Clausewitz's lifetime was the French revolutionary campaign against its neighbours, including Prussia, which had rendered obsolete, already in the 1790s, the ancient military alternatives of march and siege which were the limits of Gramsci's military analogies, still, in the 1930s.

Although a servant of the Prussian crown, what Clausewitz described was warfare in the age of mass democracy. As one who had fought against Napoleon Bonaparte, Clausewitz had understood Napoleon's new kind of warfare, as well as, or better than, anyone else.

Clausewitz defined strategy and tactics as "the linking together of separate battle engagements into a single whole, for the final object of the war." To define strategy in this way, as end, and tactics as means, was a profound contribution which we in South Africa have benefited from. "Strategy and Tactics" has been the name of the ANC's main theoretical document for 46 years; for its conception, at least in part, we owe a debt to Clausewitz

Equally as profound is the complex of thinking around Clausewitz' well-known understanding of war as an extension of politics by other means.

Not only does this mean that war is always and everywhere subordinate to politics; but it also means that war (the

breakdown of negotiation and the resort to force) must, and can only, return the parties to the negotiating table. War is an interlude of brutality between negotiations. This was Clausewitz's most famous insight.

To sum up: The world of 1848, when the [Communist Manifesto](#) was first published, was already charged up with historical potential by great preceding events, first and foremost among them being the Great French Revolution, with the Napoleonic Wars that followed it; and also by great thinkers and writers, foremost among them [G W F Hegel](#) and Carl von Clausewitz, whose insights will assist us to understand the place of violence in the history of revolution.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [On War, Chapter 1, What is War?, 1827, Clausewitz](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).